Contextualising policy work: policy enactment and the specificities of English secondary schools

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Abstract

This paper returns to a long-standing theme in education research, the ways in which 'contextual factors impact on what schools do, as well as directly on what pupils achieve' (Lupton, 2004: 4). Drawing on a project designed to explore the early effects of reforms to national examinations, the curriculum for 14 -16 year olds and school accountability measures in English secondary schools, this paper considers the perceptions and experiences of teachers currently charged with enacting these reforms specifically in the light of their situated school realities in three different settings. A case is made for a contextually sensitive approach towards policy making and policy enactment that takes account of some of the more nuanced distinctions among schools' contextual positionings.

Key words: policy contexts; policy enactment; English secondary schools

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Context Matters

Over the last forty years, a great deal of research has demonstrated the ways in which material factors such as disadvantage, poverty and social class shape the processes and outcomes of schooling (e.g. Halsey *et al.,* 1980; Connelly *et al.,* 2014). However, this material – or structural - perspective has been interrupted to some extent in more recent years, notably by the extensive body of school improvement and effectiveness research that has explored the role played by in-school dynamics in improving educational outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Harris and Ranson, 2005). Where schools in challenging circumstances have done better than some of their equally disadvantaged neighbours, it has been claimed that it is 'good' leadership and 'good' teaching that made the difference (Reynolds *et al*., 2014; Connelly *et al.,* 2014). School effectiveness work is frequently presented as a panacea for schools seeking to enhance the educational prospects of their children and students, focusing as it does on improving the quality of teaching, learning and leadership. These factors undoubtedly play a part in challenging what Harris and Ranson (2005, p. 584) see as 'the stubborn relationship between social disadvantage and underachievement' in schools, but there are other elements in play.

In this paper, we want to explore 'the intricate and intimate connections between what school managers and teachers do and the socioeconomic and discursive contexts within which they operate' (Gewirtz, 1998, p. 440). Our case is that, even where schools are located in the same areas, where they follow the same curriculum and where they employ similarly trained teachers who have to enact the same policies, schools are not the same and the 'nuances of local context [can] cumulatively make a considerable difference to school processes and student achievement' (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 309). Many policies assume that schools are equally able to address reforms and demands in a similar fashion and some policy analyses 'dematerialise' the way in which schools are represented (Braun *et al.,* 2011). This is at odds with the findings of a substantial body of research, including some of our own earlier work (e.g. references

removed for peer-review) and that of Thrupp and Lupton (2006), which has shown that, in practice, a range of situated factors influence how schools enact policies. In this paper, we want to build on this tradition to contextualize the 'policy work' (Ball *et al*., 2012) of schools operating in a newly intensified high-stakes accountability climate in which the significance of context is either ignored in policy circles or dismissed with the mantra that context is not an excuse for poor school performance (an idea expressed, for example, in the 'no-excuses' schools movement originating in the US) (Carter, 2000; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Peal, 2014). In doing so, we will seek to demonstrate how a range of structural factors interact, overlap with and mediate the specificities of in-school differences.

In a study of policy enactment in English secondary schools, Braun *et al*. (2011, p. 585) started to chart the sorts of factors that influenced a school's capacity to enact policies. They argued that policies are 'shaped and influenced by *school-specific factors* which act as constraints, pressures and enablers' (Ball, *et al.,* 2012, p. 19, *our italics*) that tend to be neglected by policy makers and researchers. These include structural-material factors but incorporate additional factors. Ball *et al.* (2012) grouped all of these factors into four overlapping and interconnecting categories which they called 'situated', 'professional', 'material' and 'external' 'contextual dimensions' (see Table 1).

(Table 1 goes here)

In what follows, drawing on detailed analysis of the ways in which three London secondary schools are enacting current policies in the light of their own *school-specific factors*, we argue that individual schools have different capacities for 'doing' policy work and that they make use of 'aspects of their culture or ethos, as well as of situated necessities' in this work (Braun, *et al.,* 2011, p. 586).

Raising standards in English secondary schools

In this paper, our focus is on the enactment of a specific set of mandated policies that have come out of the raising standards agenda (Ofsted, 2014). These are systemic reforms that have been mandated for all English state maintained secondary schools.

The stated aims of these reforms were to raise the performance of English secondary schools and reduce the number of students leaving school with no qualifications or with qualifications the Conservative Government judged to be inferior, thereby improving the life chances of disadvantaged students (Morgan, 2015). These changes were intended to 'restore rigour, and bring standards up to match the best around the world' (DfE, 2015a, p. 8). Briefly, the intention was to create new GCSEs (national examinations taken by sixteen year olds) that were 'more academically demanding' than their previous incarnations (DfE 2016a, p. 92). The content was to be made more challenging; terminal examinations were to replace modules and coursework that had previously been used as the default method of assessment; and a new grading system was introduced with a scale from 1 to 9 to enable more fine grained distinctions 'and greater stretch' (DfE 2016a, p. 98) at the top end of the scale.

In addition, a raft of new accountability measures was introduced. In 2010, prior to the development of the new GCSEs, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) had been established as a new school performance measure which was calculated on the basis of the percentage of students attaining GCSEs at grade C and above in English, mathematics, the sciences, history or geography and a foreign language. In order to ensure that students study more traditional subjects, in 2016 the government introduced two additional performance measures: 'Progress 8' and 'Attainment 8'. To calculate Progress 8 and Attainment 8 scores, the subjects students are expected to take are clustered into three subject 'baskets' - 'Basket 1': English and Mathematics (both double weighted); 'basket 2': three other EBacc subjects from sciences, computer science, geography, history and modern foreign languages; and 'basket 3': three further qualifications which can be remaining EBacc qualifications or any other subjects from a prescribed list.

In guidance for schools, Progress 8 is referred to as 'the headline indicator of school performance determining the floor standard' (DfE, 2016b, p.7; 2018, p.8). The aim of Progress 8 is to record the progress students make from the end of primary school to the end of their time in secondary school based on the Attainment 8 measure - a calculation of an individual student's average attainment in their best eight subjects across the three baskets. The Progress 8 school score usually falls between -1 and +1. A score of +1 means that students in that school have achieved one grade higher in each qualification

than other similar students nationally. A score of -1 means they have achieved one grade lower. The average score of all secondary schools is 0.

The school performance measures have undergone further revision since 2016 (DfE, 2018). At the time of writing the key accountability measures for secondary schools that are published in the performance tables are: the percentage of students entering the EBacc, the EBacc average point score, students' progress across eight qualifications (Progress 8), their attainment across these qualifications (Attainment 8), the percentage of students achieving a 'strong pass' (deemed to be a Grade 5 GCSE) in English and mathematics and the percentage staying in education or moving into employment post-16. Although these measures have been designed to encourage schools to emphasise the importance of EBacc subjects to their students, students are not yet required to take the full EBacc (DfE, 2015a). The government's aim is that, by September 2022, 75 per cent of Year 10 (14-15-year-old) students in state-funded schools will take GCSE courses in the EBacc subjects, rising to 90 per cent of Year 10 students by 2025 (Long and Bolton, 2017).

In English schools, high-stakes testing and teacher responsibility for good outcomes, coupled with parental choice, league tables, performance management and performance-related pay are all well established as measures designed to enhance school and teacher quality. As in many parts of the world, these sorts of measures are frequently used to excoriate those schools, teachers and leadership teams that seem to be doing less well than others (Ragusa & Bousfield, 2017). In what follows, we detail the complex set of challenges produced by this high-stakes policy assemblage for school leaders and teachers who have to enact these reforms in different and often challenging circumstances. Our analysis of these challenges is organized around the four dimensions of difference that Ball *et al*. (2012) call 'contextual dimensions'. In the final section of the paper we want to revisit the way in which context is conceptualized in Ball *et al*.'s work in the light of the analysis presented here, before going on to draw out the policy implications of our analysis, in particular reflecting on what taking context seriously might look like in terms of practical policy making.

The study

This paper draws on data from a National Union of Teachers (NUT) commissioned investigation into the early effects of the reforms with a particular focus on the views of teachers currently charged with enacting them (reference removed for peer review). The research involved a survey of secondary school NUT members to provide a national picture of these effects. To complement the survey data, case studies of three contrasting non-selective, coeducational and non-denominational schools in London were carried out in order to generate more fine-grained qualitative data and it is these that we draw on in this paper. The case study schools, identified here by their pseudonyms, Ashfield, Maple Way and Oak Park, were selected to represent a diverse sample in terms of social class composition and size of intake, school type, and accountability pressures (see Table 2).

(Table 2 goes here)

10-12 semi-structured interviews were conducted in each of the case study schools with a purposive sample of teachers consisting of members of the senior leadership team (SLT), heads of department, classroom teachers, special educational needs and disabilities co-ordinators (SENDCos) and union representatives. Teachers from 'core' subject areas (English, mathematics and science) were interviewed as well as teachers of other EBacc subjects (modern foreign languages, history and geography) and non-EBacc subjects (such as religious education, drama, PE and classics). The interviews were designed to elicit participants' insights about how the reforms were being enacted in their schools and about their impact on school practices and student experiences as well as to explore the school-specific contextual factors that facilitated or impeded the enactment of the reforms. We also explored the three schools' websites as these are indicative of culture and ethos (Pauwels, 2011). We consulted the government website, 'Find and compare schools in England,' to access attainment data for the three schools. Finally, we consulted 'School Cuts' (https://schoolcuts.org.uk/#!/) a website published by a coalition of trade unions to collect and share data about the financial situation of schools in the context of cuts to public sector funding.

These case studies enabled us to explore the schools' institutional strategies and practices in a way that was sensitive both to the contextual influences on their responses to the reforms described above (such as position in the league tables and the nature of student intakes) and the difficulties of separating out the effects of different policy

initiatives that had to be simultaneously negotiated. The interviews were transcribed and coded manually using a system of thematic coding to analyse the teachers' accounts specifically in the light of school-specific factors. Braun *et al's* (2011) 'contextual dimensions' (see Table 1) were applied both as analytic prompts in interviewing and in data coding. Pseudonyms have been used in the reporting of the findings and some details have been changed to conceal the identity of both schools and teachers.

We begin by taking each of our three schools in turn and detailing the ways in which different factors influence how they enact the reforms.

Oak Park

Situated factors

Oak Park, a co-educational comprehensive with around 962 students, describes itself as a community school. Its website conveys a sense of the way that the students are valued. At the time we were collecting data, the site was structured round professionally photographed shots of a diverse range of students. 32% of all students speak English as an additional language. The school had been categorised by Ofsted as 'requiring improvement' but in 2017 this was revised to 'good' with what Ofsted described as 'outstanding leadership'. This may well have been as a result of the new head teacher who took up the post in 2015 and who had significant experience of helping schools to improve their performance. The school emblazons its Ofsted scores on the front pages of its webpage, presumably in an attempt to indicate to prospective parents, students and teachers that it is paying serious attention to improvement. In 2017, the school achieved a Progress 8 score that was above the English secondary school average (at +0.24). The school website reveals an interest in raising money from parents. This is signalled on the front page, and ways of providing financial support to the school are conveyed regularly in the newsletters that are emailed to parents and stored on the site. According to the School Cuts website, the school is estimated to lose funding at the rate of £490 per student between 2015 and 2020 and financial shortfalls are a problem for the school.

Frequent changes in the headship of the school were identified as a challenge by many teachers although, by the time we were working in the school, the situation appeared to have been resolved. As Helen King (Head of Geography) put it, 'we had a new Head in

September. Before that we had an interim Head from a local school for just over a year and before that the Head was asked to leave'.

Oak Park is an inclusive school with a commitment to serving its local community. Student attainment is at the national average although the percentage of its students eligible for free school meals (a proxy for socio-economic status) is well above the national average (see Table 2). Many of the teachers talked about how the social and emotional pressures that students faced had been exacerbated by cuts in the public sector. Students under these sorts of pressures are more likely to present more of a challenge in the classroom.

> There is more deprivation at this school, and it really is a community school, it does reflect, you'll meet a lot of middle-class book-rich families, and then some families that are really struggling economically… The bit I'm most surprised by over the last few years, the amount of families and therefore the children here at the school that are affected by the loss of housing benefits, this 'bedroom tax', having to move, if they live in council houses.[1] (Marina Leventis, Assistant Head of Inclusion, Spanish)

Professional factors

In Oak Park, all the teachers we interviewed highlighted pressures that were related to their subject and its place in the EBacc hierarchy – for example, whether their subjects were 'core' or 'peripheral' to EBacc. These pressures connected to issues of accountability, hegemonic discourses of success and staffing issues.

> They are encouraged to do the EBacc subject, which is history or geography, *they are very much pushed into that*… So yeah, I can't really blame the school for that, it's a national policy, so it's worrying, very worrying for RE, because…

[1] Under 'the under-occupancy penalty' (colloquially known as the bedroom tax), introduced as part of the UK Welfare Reform Act 2012, tenants living in social housing with rooms deemed to be 'spare' experience a reduction in their benefit entitlement, resulting in them having to either fund this reduction from their incomes or face rent arrears and possible eviction.

> ultimately RE teachers' jobs are sort of on the line to an extent. (Finn Holt, Head of Religious Education) (our italics)

In light of the pressure on students to attain in mathematics and English, Oak Park had ensured that these 'core' subjects were given more time and that other more traditional academic subjects were supported in the timetabling arrangements. Subjects deemed to be less central were less well supported. But even for 'core' subjects, there were other pressures. For example, 'core' subject departments were under close scrutiny because of the high stakes nature of results in these subjects. As one head of department put it, staff are under 'huge pressure': 'you know, accountability around English and maths, as a head of faculty, is just immense… and I mean you are powerless against those kind of forces' (Kaye Greene, Head of English). Such pressures were further exacerbated by the substantial curriculum changes associated with the reforms and the fact that the new specifications for curriculum content were published very late on in the school year.

> The specifications for the GCSEs came out really late… So it's real kind of, you know, fingers on the edge. You are one page ahead of the book as it were, for where you are supposed to be, and scary business, we just haven't had enough time. (Gareth Enders, Head of Chemistry)

Teachers discussed other pressures that they were experiencing to do with performance management demands as well as the financial incentives that were centred on being 'successful' in national examinations.

> I know we have performance-related pay but appraisals and observations with grades and support plans and disciplinary procedures and capability procedures and all of these different things, plus the accountability for every exam, … so many things together. (Marina Leventis, Assistant Head Teacher, Inclusion)

Other professional constraints that were highlighted by teachers included a lack of specialist teachers and the fear that subjects that were not 'core' would not recruit students and that teachers would eventually lose their jobs:

> So it's going to be the first time in a long time that you'll have so many non-specialists teaching … because the school needs to be economic … So they'd

> timetabled two languages teachers to teach Spanish who don't speak Spanish and they've just been told to get on with it. (Helen King, Head of Geography)

> But yeah, recruitment for your subject is, you know if you don't recruit and someone leaves they won't be replaced. If you don't recruit possibly you're going to be eased out the door. (Sofia Fernandez, art teacher)

Material and external factors

Oak Park was under financial pressure, an experience that is shared by many schools in England. As Andrews and Lawrence (2018) have shown, some schools, and they highlight maintained secondary schools in particular, have been running with deficits for a long time.

> So far schools have taken various measures to reduce costs, such as switching suppliers, reducing energy usage and reducing the size of leadership teams. However, as around two-thirds of school spending is on education staff, schools are unlikely to be able to achieve the scale of savings necessary without also cutting staff. (Andrews and Lawrence, 2018, p. 5)

From what the teachers had to say, it would appear that cuts were already being factored into Oak Park's planning. One of the most pressing concerns, relayed to us, was the significant reduction in teaching assistants (TAs). Oak Park is a large school with high proportions of students needing additional support (see Table 2) and so this loss was particularly keenly felt.

> What's affecting schools is not the new GCSE, it's the funding cuts. So no-one sits in a meeting and says the new GCSEs blah blah blah. They say we are losing the TAs … so it's not about the changes, we've had changes in the curriculum before… We've got no TAs, they went down from something like forty TAs to now we've got like fifteen. (Gareth Enders, Head of Chemistry)

Braun *et al*. (2011) found that external constraints, beyond the control of individual schools and teachers, played a significant part in how schools were, or were not able to enact policy. In Oak Park, teachers highlighted a range of such external pressures: that

governments did not trust teachers; Ofsted inspections and the associated pressure to raise attainment; and the impact of financial pressures on staffing. These pressures were felt across all subjects, whether they were 'core' EBacc subjects, other EBacc subjects or subjects peripheral to EBacc:

> Being a core subject but also having results that essentially have not been considered good enough for our students, there's been a lot of pressure on year eleven results this year… And in the context of Ofsted as well, you know, our department was told that we weren't doing a good enough job and if our results aren't good enough then Ofsted will be back and it won't be a good report. (Leila Ferguson, Second in Charge, Mathematics)

Like all schools, Oak Park had to meet the challenges of changes in accountability and assessment demands and curriculum content in a context of extensive cuts in funding. Out of our three case study schools, Oak Park had experienced the highest per-student cuts to their budget. The school was improving in Ofsted's terms and was doing well in terms of its Progress 8 score. It now had more stable leadership with an experienced head teacher in post. It was evident that the school had turned a corner, but the school was also holding on to its community-focused ethos and its 'passionate' belief 'in the potential of each young person' and the value of working with their families to ensure that every student was succeeding (Oak Park website). These interwoven factors and values influenced the way in which reform-related policy work was being done in Oak Park.

Maple Way

Situated factors

Our second school, Maple Way, is small and promotes itself as caring and as being a 'family' school. Housed in its original historic building with a newer annex, it has limited plant facilities. The school is over-subscribed and at the time of us carrying out the research had been graded as 'good' by Ofsted in terms of its students' achievements, although its results had fallen off somewhat in the previous year and, in 2017, the school was assessed as being 'well below average' for its Progress 8 score (-0.67). As a

small school, it can only offer one modern foreign language (French) but, unusually, it offers Citizenship to GCSE. Ofsted is not a central feature of the front page of Maple Way's website. The school has recently closed its sixth form so only recruits students from 11 to 16 years of age with 120 places allocated for each year. According to School Cuts, class sizes have increased and there is projected to be a per-student loss of £225 between 2015 and 2020.

There are advantages in being very small: relationships are easier to cultivate and all the families and children are known to staff. At the same time, because of its smallness, the school is not able to benefit from the economies of scale available to our other two schools, as schools are funded in relation to their numbers on roll. As we have already stated, many schools are experiencing funding difficulties because their budgets have failed to keep pace with rising costs (particularly salary and national insurance costs - Roberts and Bolton, 2017). Many of the students live close to the school, in one of the poorest areas in London, and about a third of the intake is eligible for free school meals (see Table 2). The head teacher spoke of 'considerable challenges' facing the school and its students, associated with the schools' location in an area of socio-economic disadvantage (Penny Athanas, Headteacher).

> This is a mixed comprehensive school with students of all ability, students that have different skills, different weaknesses, and, obviously, there are students that are not going to be successful at EBacc or even enjoy it. (Leo Black, Head of Year 11, physical education teacher)

Like our other two schools, Maple Way has experienced some churn in the senior leadership team but this has involved more senior personnel in Maple Way and the new leaders (the head and two out of three deputy heads) were in their first year when we were carrying out the interviews.

> There have been a huge number of changes that have had to take place… So two of the deputy heads, one was moving on, one was retiring as well. Which left the current one, and then me to come in. So there was quite a change in structure at the top. (Mike Astin, Deputy Headteacher)

Like all schools, Maple Way was attempting to manage mandated curriculum and assessment changes. However, because of its size and the closure of its sixth form, it was in a more precarious position.

> We are very, a very, very, small school so we can't offer significant flexibility … [What we do] probably … won't be determined by Government sort of legislation or demand. It will be determined by the fact that my budget is reduced… so it's not determined by any progress measures although that's obviously also in my head. (Penny Athanas, Headteacher)

One more factor that impacted on Maple Way's capacity to manage the new curriculum requirements related to its lack of outdoor facilities: the school was going to be less well placed to deliver the new physical education (PE) demands for more team sports such as football and rugby on site.

> And obviously, what doesn't help us is we have no facilities at this school, so there's no fields, there's no football pitches, there's no grass, we don't get to go offsite, so it really, really does impact. (Leo Black, Head of Year 11, PE teacher)

Professional factors

As Maple Way was in the early stages of changes in its senior leadership team as well as simultaneously having to navigate significant changes in curriculum, assessment and accountability regimes, it is not surprising that some teachers reported tensions in the school. One tension that was mentioned by a number of respondents related to staff attitudes towards changes that were sometimes perceived to be the 'whims' of new staff rather than recognised as responses to the demands of government policy.

> Where there are problems is situations where certain teachers that have been teaching for a longer period of time don't, or aren't always ready to change their, the way they teach… so there's a little bit of a conflict in that case. (Celine Dumont, Head of Modern Foreign Languages)

Many of the changes that were being enacted in the school were in response to gaps in provision and a lack of systems in the school. 'So, it's, I mean please don't, I'm not in any way decrying the school or whatever but it just feels that it's kind of like 10 years

behind everywhere else' (Mike Astin, Deputy Headteacher). Given that the school had not done well in the most recent national examinations, there was pressure for change and one area that was prioritised was the need to talk about student progress with parents and carers in a more systematic manner and to record progress more efficiently. In particular, the new leadership identified a problem with data management in the school:

> There was no clear routine about how data was collected, entered, fed back to staff, to students, to parents… I've come from an academy where we did nine data drops in a year per year-group. So, you know, parents had nine bits a year of information to having one a year [at Maple Way]. (Mike Astin, Deputy Headteacher)

The leadership was also keen to deliver on the EBacc performance requirements. This involved reorganising timetabling and looking at the implications of the more traditional subject hierarchy associated with the EBacc (reference removed for peer review) for the subject-offer in the school. Maria Alton (Head of Drama) talked about 'a culture that seeps in and kids are … fed this particular message that there are subjects that are softer, and subjects that are more challenging'. This perceived shift towards the 'core' subjects, like mathematics, English and science and away from ('softer') more creative subjects (like art, drama and PE) was a cause of concern for the teachers we interviewed, as were the specifications for subject content. For example, Charlie Zheng (Head of Music) said that 'the new GCSE for Music is hard… and a lot of it will be memorising for the exam which I don't agree with… That's not learning'. Similarly, Olivia Cartwright (Head of English) thought that the new specifications had 'really squashed a sense of diversity, because we do fewer women writers, we do fewer writers of colour, and that, I don't think, is a good thing. Especially in a school with an intake which is as diverse as ours is'.

According to the new deputy head, Maple Way was not prepared for many of these changes that had to be responded to fairly quickly. Penny Anthanas highlighted some of the curriculum pressures that had to be dealt with in response to which 'core' subjects were being given extra time, whilst time allocated to EBacc-peripheral subjects was reduced.

> You can't offer a broad curriculum like you used to be able to because, for example, maths needs more time now since the curriculum has changed. So maths has extra hours, science has extra hours, you're cutting hours from other subjects. … the pressure [is] on the school and the reality is we're not going to have, if the school is judged on its EBacc measure, we won't come into double figures. (Penny Anthanas, Headteacher)

Charlie was a realist and he was aware that the double-weighting being given to English and Mathematics in the EBacc meant that both student and school success depended on doing well in these subjects:

> *Obviously,* the children have now more English, maths and science lessons which is important for them because of the way they are judged and the way the school is judged. (Charlie Zheng, Head of Music)

In our wider survey of secondary school teachers (reference removed for peer review), some teachers of non-'core' subjects expressed a worry that the emphasis on 'core' subjects could threaten their own discipline; if students no longer chose their subjects as options, teachers feared that posts would be lost and some subjects would no longer be offered in the school. In Maple Way, concerns were expressed by some staff that 'choosing' was being managed for the school's benefit rather than being driven by student interest, with some respondents suggesting that student choice was being 'manipulated' or at least 'massaged' by the school's approach to options-choosing and the way that subjects were lined up against one another.

> Once they pick their options, the way that this school works is they have an interview with an SLT member. And I know for a fact for the real, real academic kids, the kids that are gonna get their As and A*s in anything they do, if they've chosen my subject, [the SLT] will try to convince them subtly to ditch it and to take something that is in bucket two instead. (Leo Black, Head of Year 11, PE teacher)

Maria Alton, the Head of Drama, while reporting that, so far, little had changed, was fearful of the longer-term consequences of students not choosing to study her subject: 'I sort of feel that what will happen is that the drop in numbers will provide evidence for someone then to go, 'oh well, your uptake's not good enough, so therefore there's our

excuse to potentially cut that subject'. Such curriculum change pressures were expressed by teachers of EBacc-peripheral subjects in professional as well as in personal/affectual terms.

We have already discussed lack of resources, lack of facilities and changes in personnel within the leadership team. These factors overlap and intersect with situational and professional constraints, and all these factors have consequences for the emotional well-being of both staff and students that are exacerbated by the high-stakes policy environment.

> For some students that pressure is intense, the pressure of family expectation, of school expectation, is intense, because if they don't do it as a school, we don't do it, and if we don't do it then people will not want to come, and then we are done. (Olivia Cartwright, Head of English)

We have also signalled the way that 'core' subjects benefit at the expense of EBacc-peripheral subjects, and this manifests in less curriculum time and internal 'competition' or 'fighting', as Oliver says, between different disciplines.

> We've lost hours, we were doing three hours, year 7s had three hours of technology a week and three hours in year 8 and two hours in year 9. Now we have one hour 40 minutes in year 7, 8 and 9 per week. So that's an immediate effect … so we're in a pool where we're fighting against - … we're fighting for students with art, drama, music, PE, and amongst ourselves, so engineering's fighting for product design or graphics students. (Oliver Diallo, Second in Charge, Design and Technology)

Material and external factors

All schools face the same external constraints, such as Ofsted, examinations, league tables, changes to the curriculum and assessment and pressures of accountability (Perryman *et al.,* 2011) but some schools' experiences are more acute and immediate than others. There is a belief in Maple Way that more needs to be done to ensure that the results of any inspections will be positive; there is also a fear that if students do not

make what Ofsted would deem to be acceptable progress, this could have significant ramifications for teachers' material conditions:

> I think it's gradually got more like that. More fear of Ofsted, more fear of capability, more fear of performance management. You won't get your pay rise if you don't do this.... threats basically. If you're not seen to be doing all the things that we think you should be doing, then we won't promote you, won't give you a pay rise. (Oliver Diallo, Second in Charge, Design and Technology)

Teachers recognise that in many ways the SLT are under exactly the same pressures as themselves because of accountability demands: 'the SLT want you to get results, it's not the SLT's fault. It's because of things like league tables which are forcing people to compete' (Andreas Russo, Curriculum lead, Humanities). Externally driven pressures are often interpreted in the light of contextual specificities (for example, resources and school budgets) as well as individual roles (such as teachers' subject areas). Maria Alton, the Head of Drama talked of intensified 'scrutiny' and a desire to measure – the 'datafication' of schooling - and the losses that this can mean for students and teachers.

> You know, what is easier to measure becomes more valuable than perhaps something that is less easy to measure. And I find that particularly in drama there's like a real push towards more skills and, like, end results rather than process. (Maria Alton, Head of Drama)

Charlie puts it even more directly when he argues that there is a shift towards a utilitarian approach. These are the stresses and pressures coming from external environments that Maple Way is managing to resist; at least for now.

> Academy schools are already saying, 'well you know what, if it doesn't deliver, if it doesn't get us outstanding for Ofsted, if it doesn't deliver us a positive Progress 8 school, what's the point? Why have music? … Some Academies they're just going to say 'what's the point?' You know it's the business model, if it doesn't pay, don't do it, if it's not delivering progress don't do it or you can do it after school as an extra, so that is a concern. (Charlie Zheng, Head of Music)

Maple Way is our most vulnerable school. Its size determines its budget and the financial situation is driving much of its decision-making. The school has also had to

cope with high staff turnover, especially within the senior leadership team. Its most recent Progress 8 score is a cause for some anxiety within the school. Yet despite these significant pressures, recruitment is buoyant for this 'family' school located in an extremely deprived part of the city. Maple Way is working hard to enact current reforms in a highly demanding situation as well as holding on to its core values of caring for the students as well as 'ensuring their futures' and making a difference – but all this is a difficult task to bring off in the light of its specific contextual environment.

Ashfield

Situated factors

Turning to our third school, Ashfield is rated by Ofsted as an 'outstanding' provider and this was badged three times on the front page of its website at the time we were collecting data. While the website is the least attractive of our three schools – mainly text-based with few visuals - in a counter-intuitive way, it might be argued that the message is that the school does not spend time on peripheral matters; they concentrate on excellence in teaching and learning and rely on their reputation to see them through. On a page featuring a message from the (new) headteacher there are comments about the school's emphasis on 'high standards'. The staff 'demand and achieve high standards in all areas of school life'. There is a 'relentless focus' on academic excellence. The school 'insists' on good manners.

An over-subscribed school situated in a suburb of London, Ashfield has an ethnically diverse student body and 43% of students speak English as an additional language. Like the other two schools, it is a co-educational, community comprehensive school, but the intake is more advantaged than that of either Maple Way or Oak Park (see free school meals eligibility as detailed in Table 2). In 2017 the school was categorised as 'well above average' in its Progress 8 score (at +0.52).

> Our students are, on the whole, lovely, aspirational, lovely families. The ambition comes from outside of the school. They have predominantly scientific, maths-y, engineer-y ambitions. (Daniella Pine, Second in Charge, English)

Fiona Newby, Assistant Headteacher, described Ashfield as 'a relatively traditional school in a relatively affluent area'. She spoke about the local context in terms of the competition between other schools in the area (the only respondent in any of the three schools who did so):

> We are a mixed school in an area where there's a girls school within the academies sort of chain, where there isn't a boys school, so there are more boys that tend to come to our school than girls because of that feeding into the all-girls school… And so, for us, we do look very carefully at that boy-girl mix and we are looking at different ethnic groups.

There are nearly two thousand students enrolled at the school (see Table 2), so Ashfield is financially privileged compared with our other two schools. However, according to School Cuts, class sizes have increased and there is projected to be a cut in per-student funding of £285 between 2015 and 2020. Given that the National Audit Office estimates that three quarters of a school's budget goes on staff costs (teaching and non-teaching), while Ashfield has more financial capacity than our other two schools, it still has to manage its income efficiently and there are financial constraints. As the National Audit Office (2016, p. 5) pointed out:

> Pay rises, the introduction of the national living wage, higher employer contributions to national insurance and the teachers' pension scheme, non-pay inflation and the apprenticeship levy will mean additional costs for schools.

Ashfield comes across as an extremely well organised school. As with the other schools in our sample, the head teacher is relatively new in post, but unlike the other schools, he had previously served as a Deputy Head in the school for a considerable time. The SLT is well established, long-serving and extremely experienced; it was aware of changes that were coming down the line and took pro-active steps to actively strengthen the school's capacity to 'get ahead of the game' rather than 'fire-fighting' when further reforms were mandated. It has the budgetary capacity and the foresight to build up new expertise that it anticipates will be needed in the future. There were teachers at Ashfield who could be described as policy entrepreneurs (Ball, et al., 2012, p. 53) who 'draw on disparate ideas, examples of "good practice" and other resources, to produce something

original'. This approach towards 'doing policy' was evidenced in some of the staff appointments as well as curriculum innovation that took place in the school.

One more situational factor was the school staff's internal coherence and confidence in what they were doing as well as an awareness that the school was 'protected' to a large degree from external pressures like Ofsted. They were able to consider educational reforms and harness them to their own ethos and culture, using 'what the government is recommending to our own advantage' (Fiona Newby, Assistant Headteacher); and when 'the agendas come, it's not tail wagging dogs, we think about them as the senior team, and then some form of strategy is put into place and staff are trained up accordingly' (Arjun Kumar, Assistant Headteacher, Inclusion).

Professional factors

Some years prior to our undertaking the research, the school had moved option-choosing from Year 9 to Year 8 to allow more time for concentration on the examination curriculum. This did not mean that students were being leveraged into certain subjects or that they were being encouraged to limit their range – quite the opposite.

> So the vast majority of our students take ten GCSEs. I know that there are a number of schools where they have considered or have dropped an option block because the idea is, if the subjects are going to be harder, the children should be taking fewer to enable them to focus better. Now we haven't done that because we want to maintain our range of subjects. We want to maintain the possibility of children taking an arts subject and that being a viable point, whether that'll be a good thing we will find out, but … actually, for most children they have time and actually reducing a GCSE won't make them work harder, that sometimes you actually need to give children a little bit more of a challenge to ensure that they maintain the high standards. (Fiona Newby, Assistant Headteacher)

Ashfield was committed to maintaining a wide curriculum offer; for example, the Faculty of Linguistic and Cultural Studies offered French, German, Spanish and Latin. Classics is offered to a wide range of students and the school has just introduced

Ancient History that will be part of its revised EBacc offer. The school is involved in a national project on 'Oracy across the Curriculum'. It also maintains a large team of qualified teachers who offer Philosophy, Religion and Ethics (PRE).

> And also one of the benefits of PRE is that you can be quite open in what you discuss, and it isn't necessarily always suited to just rushing people through an exam in an hour a week… We can teach, we are trying to make it much more interactive, really, really engaging, big discussion focus. (Gracie Lambert, Head of Philosophy, Religion and Ethics)

As in Oak Park and Maple Way, there were some concerns about changes in subject specifications; but such concerns were far more muted at Ashfield. Most teachers seemed confident that they were managing well.

> We are an all-inclusive comprehensive school, so we had to pick a text that would fit our lowest ability pupils and our highest and still push them, but also that was accessible. That was quite difficult, I'd say that was the most difficult element of choosing the specifications, picking the right texts. (Beth Smithson, Head of Drama)

As with the other two schools, teachers were generally welcoming of some aspects of the assessment reforms. They welcomed what they regarded as the inclusive potential of measuring the progress of all students through the device of Progress 8, which was described as a 'healthier measure' (Arjun Kumar, Assistant Headteacher, Inclusion).

The school was outwards-looking and kept up to date with debates and research into 'best-practice'. In part this was enabled by the school's confidence as well as by the staff's commitment towards continually refining and improving its teaching and learning. When teachers talked directly about the EBacc and what this new accountability measure might mean for their work and the school, few expressed concern about this limiting choice or restricting access to creative or non-EBacc subjects as was the case in the other two schools and in our national survey (reference removed for peer review).

> I would say that the feeling in the faculty is quite confident which, again, could be an interesting leadership technique, couldn't it, of like 'don't worry guys

> everything is fine, we're fine compared to others'. But nationally, you feel like people are kind of fumbling their way through. (Daniella Pine, Second in Charge, English)

However, while most people were comfortable with the changes that were being required, the Head of Mathematics expressed concern about lack of time to prepare for these reforms as well as worries that students might not do well in the new examination.

> It's just been rushed in and it hasn't allowed teachers to be trained properly in the new sort of problem solving, maths mastery type ethos … So I'm a bit concerned from that [point of] view, that we will drop and then sort of be blamed for the whole drop in the school's results … so that's a big concern. (Doug Thompson, Head of Mathematics)

Material and external factors

While Ashfield is better funded than the other two schools, there are some material factors that may impact the school's capacity to do well in the new assessment and accountability regime specifically related to issues of recruitment and staffing (Foster, 2018). On the one hand, there is a concern about the national difficulties in recruiting science and modern language teachers. On the other hand, the school has made a number of new appointments to enable staff to respond positively to changing curriculum demands and pressure points within the school, for example, a numeracy co-ordinator.

Unlike at Maple Way or Oak Park, there was no financial pressure to reduce EBacc-peripheral subjects – the school did not have to think about areas of the curriculum in this way. For example, Fiona Newby, one of the assistant headteachers, commented: 'We're very strong in drama, we're very strong in music, media, photography. All of those areas do very well either at GCSE or at A Level or in a number of subjects, they do very well in both'. She added that even the 'most academic' students benefit from taking an arts subject that adds 'breadth and depth to their curriculum choice'. Only one teacher mentioned financial pressures (in response to a direct question about budget

cuts): 'budget, yeah budget cuts are massive and that's what the head keeps on saying, budget cuts, really, really difficult' (Doug Thompson, Head of Mathematics).

As we have already detailed, Ashfield was, to a large extent, immune from any immediate Ofsted-related 'dangers' as, according to official indicators of success, it is an 'outstanding' school. As with many English secondary schools, it was experiencing staff recruitment and retention problems (Foster, 2018), but was able to mitigate these to some extent.

> It's really, really, tough, incredibly tough, we work very, very hard on recruitment and retention annually … we offer £1,500 for a teacher to develop, and it is [for] teaching staff to develop an aspect of pedagogy that they consider to be important to them. (Fiona Newby, Assistant Headteacher)

Another external constraint that was highlighted in Maple Way and Oak Park related to the changes in assessment techniques – the move to record progress from levels to numbers. In Ashfield, these concerns were only expressed by the Head of Mathematics.

Overall, Ashfield seemed to be thriving in the new policy climate. Fiona Newby, along with other SLT colleagues, was able to 'elaborate the condensed codes of policy texts to an imagined logic of teachers' practical work' (Singh, *et al.,* 2013, p. 477), ensure that staff were confident in their school's capacity to keep abreast of new demands and buffer them from some of the external constraints that bedevilled our two other schools. Ashfield was financially more secure, with a well-equipped plant and facilities and a committed, long-serving and established team of teachers who had 'bought into' the ethos and culture of the school.

Taking context seriously

There is a great deal that we could say about some of the key differences between schools that are often treated as contextual factors, but in this last section we want to revisit what is understood by context by. In doing so, we will draw on a helpful distinction that Thrupp (2018) has made between factors over which school leaders have control and those over which they do not. We will go on to argue that, in practice,

these different kinds of factors are inextricably interwoven. We will then suggest some correctives to the situation we have described in this paper that speak to some of the most urgent contemporary challenges facing schools in the context of an intensified high-stakes accountability climate. Finally, we flag up some of the unintended consequences of the new accountability reforms before returning to our central argument about the need for context to be taken seriously, particularly by policy-makers and politicians.

In this paper, we have worked with Ball *et al's* (2012) 'contextual dimensions' approach. We have teased out the situated, professional, material and external factors that have influenced how our three case study schools are responding to contemporary high-stakes policy imperatives. As noted above, and as Thrupp (2018, p. 93) has also observed, whilst the importance of contexts for the work of schools is well established in research, policy makers globally 'have often sought to downplay context'. However, Thrupp also asks whether it might be more useful to think about contextual factors (and he cites the Ball *et al.* 2012 model) in terms of what schools *can* and *cannot* change. His argument is that the term 'contextual factors' should only be used to refer to 'those things that are clearly not created by existing staff or reflective of their agency' and that they are not in a position to change (p. 93). Thus, he argues that what Ball *et al*. refer to as professional contexts, and even perhaps some material contexts as explicated by Ball *et al.*, are not contextual factors as teachers have some capacity for action in these arenas. Thrupp (2018) suggests that this approach can help school leaders recognise and understand what they can change and 'how they can best respond to contexts they cannot change' (p. 93). Like us, he is concerned that policy makers frequently hold schools and teachers responsible for problems outside their reach or control 'to make them into scapegoats' (p. 93). Thrupp's arguments about the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding contextual factors are borne out in our own analysis. While schools (like Ashfield) that have enjoyed longer standing success in terms of official performance indicators are better placed to innovate and 'damage-limit' aspects of policy, other less well placed schools still have some capacity to be creative and imaginative in their practices.

Thrupp's distinction is helpful as it serves to remind us that capable leadership can make a difference, and that imaginative in-school strategies and innovations can help to

shore up and support staff in their classroom work. However, it is also crucial to recognise that this kind of work still requires resources – in the form of time, energy, resourcefulness and tenacity – and is particularly taxing to deliver in times of financial pressure as well as in the light of practical constraints, such as a lack of sports facilities, musical instruments and special needs support. For example, a lack of financial resources in a school where parents are less able to supplement the budget may mean that a school might be less able to recruit and retain a wide array of teachers and offer a broad curriculum and many of the experiences that do not obviously relate to official indicators of school success but that enrich secondary schooling for young people. Thus, such schools may be compelled to concentrate on the 'core' subjects. If a school is categorised as 'under-performing', it will also have to deal with the stresses and pressures that accompany this position and address this matter as a policy priority if it is to survive. Hence the possibilities for the creative and imaginative exercise of professional agency on the part of school leaders are more limited in some schools than in others.

In the light of our findings, what do we see as being useful correctives to this situation? What does this research have to say about the challenges currently facing schools in an intensified high-stakes accountability climate? First, and most obviously, schools need the tools to do the job and lack of funding is currently a major concern for many state-maintained schools (Andrews and Lawrence, 2018; Weale, 2019). In England, while funding for schools has risen in real terms, so have salary costs. There has been no extra funding for the additional numbers of students now in schools and this effectively translates into a funding cut. Historic patterns of funding that have favoured some parts of the country over others have not been recognised and factored into the current school funding formula. Carefully worked out and coherent criteria for allocating funding that recognise the complex nuances of contextual/structural factors within a wider context of more resources being invested in the system overall would be a useful place to start; what Lupton and Thrupp (2011, p. 36) describe as 'more fundamental contextualised funding mechanisms'. Some time ago, Lupton (2004, p.34) argued that funding mechanisms based on 'the proportion of families on means-tested benefits and the proportion from ethnic minorities', which is still common practice in England (p. 34), could marginalise other factors such as schools' 'roles and activities' that could be useful in informing funding allocations. As Lupton put it, 'simple poverty and ethnicity

measures are not sufficient, and may even be misleading' (2004, p. 34). As an illustration, she found that some ethnically diverse inner-city schools offered 'more favourable environments for schooling' compared with schools that had a largely white, working-class intake. Specifically, from our work, we would argue that funding for teaching assistants and additional adults in schools should be considered in relation to needs and not just costs. Teachers' working conditions need more consideration if schools are to retain staff, particularly in challenging schools such as Maple Way and in expensive housing locales such as London. This may involve more generous financial incentives for recruitment and, more importantly, retention. In a policy context where austerity measures prevail in the public sector, it may seem somewhat naïve to be calling for additional funding for schools. However, the way in which school funding is organised and administered has led to some unequal outcomes between regions and sometimes even between schools in the same locality (Bellfield *et al.*, 2018). A recent report by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) found that a large number of schools enjoyed 'significant surpluses' and that some schools have what the Department for Education (DfE) refers to as 'excessive surpluses' (Andrews, 2019). The EPI suggests that 'one way of easing the financial pressures on some schools would be to redistribute that money more evenly between schools' (Andrews, 2019, p. 10). The report also recommends that in the upcoming education financial review, the issue of per-student costs should be revisited, a suggestion that we would endorse on the basis of our findings.

Second, attention needs to be paid to the ways in which new policy initiatives are introduced and to the ways in which schools are evaluated. As Braun *et al*. note,'policy-making and policy-makers tend to assume "best possible" environments for "implementation": ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources' (2011, p. 595). This assumption needs to be recognised and responded to by policy-makers and those charged with overseeing and evaluating educational reforms in different settings. A more contextually sensitive approach towards policy making and policy enactment that recognizes distinctions between schools is likely to be more effective than a 'one size fits all' policy approach. This might mean that when reforms are being proposed, different schools are allowed more leeway in relation to the lead-in time required for enacting these policies. Comparing schools like Maple Way with Ashfield on the basis of narrow indicators of success and publishing outcomes such as Progress 8 or GCSE

results in league tables might not always be helpful to either type of school; the consequences may include increased anxiety and higher rates of staff turn-over in the former kind of school and perhaps a form of complacency in the latter. Hence, we would also suggest that frameworks for school inspections need to take more heed of a wider range of contextual factors in terms of the kinds of data that is collected and in terms of the ways schools are reported on. In the English context, the recent proposal to 'de-intensify' the focus on examination outcomes and to re-position the curriculum as a core component of education quality in the proposed new framework for Ofsted inspections (Ofsted, 2019) is to be welcomed as a step in the right direction. However, in our view, the proposed framework does not go far enough in recognizing the importance of context in enabling/constraining the capacity of schools to provide the full breadth and depth of whatever is deemed to be a high-quality education and hence represents a missed opportunity in this regard.

A final matter that we want to raise concerns the ways in which policies work out in practice. Brady *et al.* (2014, p. 102) make the point that 'although policy changes might affect the issues they were intended to address, they also have unintended effects never envisioned by the people who initiated the changes'. At the start of this paper we adumbrated the policy intentions behind the reforms that we have been dealing with in our case studies. These reforms were intended to raise standards and create a more academically demanding curriculum (DfE, 2016). However, from what our participants reported, some subjects are becoming marginalised in those schools that enjoy less flexibility, and in some cases students are being 'nudged' towards subject 'choices' that appear to reflect the school's interests more than students' own personal interests and enjoyment. Gorard (2018) reminds us that whilst 'attainment is important [it] is only one possible educational outcome of schooling' (p.129), arguing that 'with only half of all pupils enjoying their time at school, something can and should be done to improve the situation' (p.144). Reforms that work to limit student access to a genuinely broad-based curriculum may turn out to be counter-productive in ways that have not always been anticipated by policy-makers and politicians.

In conclusion, we would suggest that the analysis presented here should serve as a timely reminder that, whatever the policy, some schools will always be better placed than others to respond to policy demands. Schools like Ashfield are better placed to

anticipate future directions in policy-making and have the resources and professional capacity, the 'contextual enablers' (Ball, et al. 2012, p. 19), to 'get ahead of the game', while less well-resourced schools are more likely to be engaged in 'fire-fighting'. Some schools are better positioned to make policy their own and meld it to their own culture/ethos rather than simply doing what is mandated. They are able to 'harness' policy to their own school development plans. While this capacity to innovate, to pro-actively lead and manage change is clearly going to be easier in better resourced schools, and financial viability is crucial, there is also a need for stable and capable leadership and a solid cohort of thoughtful and insightful classroom teachers who are 'on-side' with the school's philosophy, which is itself made more or less possible by different contexts. Hence the situated reality of schools with their particular opportunities and challenges, their different resources (staff as well as budgets) and the different external pressures that they have to navigate all continue to mean that how schools do policy *cannot* be considered without taking context seriously, something that policy-makers and politicians still seem reluctant to take on board.

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Table 1. Ball *et al*.'s 'contextual dimensions'

- **situated** contexts (such as locale, school histories, intakes and settings)
- **professional** contexts (such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, and 'policy management' in schools)
- **material** contexts (for example, staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure)
- **external** contexts (e.g. degree and quality of local authority support, pressures and expectations from broader policy context, such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions, legal requirements and responsibilities)

Source: Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012: 21

Table 2. Case study schools

Case study schools	**Ashfield** 11-19 Academy School	**Maple Way** 11- 16 Community School	**Oak Park** 11- 19 Community School
Student enrolment 2016-17	1880 students	595 students	960 students
Inspection (Ofsted) grade	Outstanding (best grade)	Good (intermediate grade)	2016 Requires Improvement 2017 (concern) Good 2017
% of A*- C GCSE grades including English and Mathematics in 2017 (national average = 43%)	82%	47%	56%
Students eligible for Free School Meals at any time in the last six years (low income families) (average for English secondary schools = 29%)	20%	59%	49%
Students registered as SEND (2016 - 2017) (average for English secondary schools = 4%)	2%	6%	5%
Students achieving EBacc in 2016. In 2017 (national average = 23% in 2016 and 21% in 2017)	32% 34%	5% 10%	30% 34%
Progress 8 score in 2017 (between -1 and +1)	Rated as 'well above average' +0.52	Rated as 'well below average' -0.67	Rated as 'above average' +0.24

Data obtained from 'Find and compare schools in England' (https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables)